

Research Materials/Source Documents  
STUDENT PAPERS

**FILE TITLE:** Background Paper on the CMSAF Paul W. Airey, WW II POW

**AUTHOR:** MSgt Larry Boyce, 17 Jan 1997

**Reviewed by:**

**AFEHRI Representative** G. R. Akin date 5 Dec 97

**EPC Representative** Joe C. C. date 12 Dec 97

**Scanner Operator** Sandy Fordman date 12 Dec 97

**APPROVED BY:** Gary R. Akin

GARY R. AKIN, CMSgt, USAF

Director

Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute

## BACKGROUND PAPER

ON

CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT OF THE AIR FORCE PAUL W. AIREY, WORLD WAR II PRISONER OF WAR

1. Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force (CMSAF) Paul W. Airey is probably best remembered in our Air Force history as a professional airman who endured, excelled and propelled himself to be the first CMSAF and proponent of the Weighted Airman Promotion System. (2:110) Perhaps less known, but just as significant, is the fact that early in his career, Chief Master Sergeant Airey flew the war-torn skies of World War II as a B-24 Liberator radio operator-aerial gunner, and like thousands of other brave airmen, became a Prisoner of War (POW). CMSAF Airey's courage, patriotism, professionalism, devotion to duty and survival with honor stand as a testament to the contributions of our enlisted corps to the history of the USAF.

2. Paul Airey was born in New Bedford, Massachusetts, in 1923. From his earliest days, Paul Airey had every inclination of joining the US Navy, due in part to the presence and prestige of the US Navy Falls River Shipyard in the Boston area. However, a negative reception by a chief petty officer in the hometown recruiting service compelled Paul Airey to go down the street and join the Army Air Forces (AAF). (2:25) He joined the AAF in November 1942 as a radio operator. (6:-) Following basic training at Atlantic City, New Jersey, from November 1942 to January 1943, Pvt Airey was reassigned to Scott Field, Illinois, where he completed Radio Operator School in June 1943. (6:-) Pfc Airey was then assigned to Aerial Gunnery School at Tyndall Field, Florida. Upon graduation in August 1943, Sgt Airey was reassigned to Fairmont Army Air Base, Fairmont, Nebraska, where he completed B-24 Liberator bomber phase training as a radio operator-aerial gunner. He was assigned to North Africa in March 1944, awaiting completion of his next base in Italy. (5:-) S/Sgt Airey was reassigned to the 831<sup>st</sup> Bombardment Squadron (Heavy), 485<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group (H), 55<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Wing (H), 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force, near Foggia (150 miles SE of Rome), Italy, in May 1944. (1:-)

3. The mission of the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force, as part of the combined bomber offensive, was the progressive destruction of

MSgt Larry Boyce/SNCOA/CSA 13/4216/lrb/17 Jan 97

the German military, industrial and economic system, and the undermining of morale of the German people to a point where their capacity for armed resistance was fatally weakened. To support this effort, the 485<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group (H) flew B-24 Liberator bombing missions under friendly fighter escort against high value targets in northern Italy, Romania, Hungary, France, Germany and Austria. In carrying out that mission, the 485<sup>th</sup> concentrated on the destruction of the German Luftwaffe, Axis oil refineries, supply installations, the ball bearing industry and other centers of vital military production. (S:-) B-24 crews were comprised of ten airmen, six enlisted (radio operator-top gunner, plus five other gunners) and four officers (pilot, copilot, navigator, bombardier). (1:-)

4. June 1944 was a fairly routine month for T/Sgt Airey as he flew more than 20 B-24 bombing missions against targets in Germany, Austria, Hungary and Romania. His crew even flew against heavily defended targets in Ploesti, Romania, shortly after the famous first low-level raid. (1:-) The 485<sup>th</sup> would drop over 1262 tons of bombs on 18 combat missions in July and lose 11 B-24 bombers plus their crews. A personal letter from Maj Gen Nathan F. Twining, Commander, 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force, to Paul's mother, Mrs. Flora Airey of Quincy, Massachusetts, would verify T/Sgt Airey would be on one of those 11 crews. (S:-)

5. T/Sgt Airey flew his 28<sup>th</sup> combat mission on 8 July 1944. On 8 July 1944 at 0633 hours, 29 B-24 aircraft of 31 scheduled took off to bomb the Florisdorf Oil Refinery near Vienna, Austria. Two aircraft failed to take off due to electrical and engine problems. After takeoff, the 29 aircraft formed in two attack units; the first unit was led by Lt Col William Herblin, Deputy Group Commander, the second unit was led by Capt Roy Reeve, Assistant Group Operations Officer. The 485<sup>th</sup> aircraft joined with bombers from the 460<sup>th</sup>, 464<sup>th</sup> and 465<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Groups at 0737 hours. One 485<sup>th</sup> bomber returned to base early due to a runaway propeller. The bomber formation rendezvoused with their fighter escort, 51 P-51 Mustangs, at 1000 hours, and proceeded to their primary target of Florisdorf.

6. T/Sgt Airey knew the inherent risks of flying such dangerous missions. Once the formation hit the initial point (a point on the ground identified visually or by navigational aids) and started its bombing run, there was no evasive action. The enemy knew this and would shoot a large amount of flak up into an area and let the bombers fly into it.

The crews just held formation and flew to the target. Flak took a terrible toll, and many thousands of casualties could be attributed to it. Thousands of POWs could testify that flak was what got them. (2:32) The B-24 formation reached Florisdorf and dropped their bombs at 1040 hours. On this day, the 485<sup>th</sup> alone dropped over 68 tons of bombs from 21,000 feet. While over the target area, the crews encountered about 30 enemy aircraft and heavy anti-aircraft flak. 18 bombers from the 485<sup>th</sup> were hit by enemy flak. Three of those 18 aircraft hit by flak would go down. T/Sgt Airey's plane was observed to go down around 1100 hours in the vicinity of Papa (60 miles W of Budapest), Hungary, with two engines smoking; ten parachutes were seen to open. (5:-)

7. T/Sgt Airey's plane was hit by flak shortly after bombs away. Due to sustained aircraft damage, the pilot feathered one engine and then another. When the oil pressure in the third engine started going down, the crew realized they would have to bail out. When the pilot said, "Get out," there was no hesitation on T/Sgt Airey's part, he immediately jumped out the camera hatch. He had seen too many bombers spin out of formation and the crews still trapped inside because of the centrifugal force. (4:4) During the slow, silent descent to earth by parachute, he instinctively pulled his cypher card from his flight suit leg pocket, tore it up into small pieces, and scattered it into the wind. This card was used by radio operators to encode and decode messages. Parachuting safely, he was immediately captured and beaten by hostile farmers. A short time later, he was taken into custody by Hungarian Axis forces and made a POW. (6:-) T/Sgt Airey and his crew were then taken to a government prison in Budapest where he remained until 28 July 1944. (5:-)

8. The Hungarians turned T/Sgt Airey over to the German Luftwaffe and on 30 July he arrived at Stalag Luft 4 near Grosstychow, on the Baltic Sea. At this point T/Sgt Airey and the other enlisted personnel on his crew were separated from the officers. T/Sgt Airey estimated the POW population at Stalag Luft 4 to be 8,000 to 10,000. The only officers in the camp were medics. There was a British doctor, an American doctor, and a British chaplain. (1:-) Since there was no Code of Conduct at this time mandating the ranking NCO take command, the formal chain of command was voted in. This enlisted chain of command established strict rules of engagement to enforce camp discipline and minimize propaganda value to their captors.

9. T/Sgt Airey had received little to no resistance training, but knew what camp conditions would be like based on briefings by escapees from German prison camps. His daily routine consisted of an early wake up and completion of chores. He spent the remainder of the day reading and walking around the camp. (1:-) Camp discipline was the key to his survival. Orders for the POWs were to have a total, hands-off policy with the Germans. "Do not fraternize with them. If they ask you questions, give them a military answer. When they try to get close to you, don't barter with them, don't give them a cigarette from your Red Cross package, and keep them away." (2:34) Starting on 6 February 1945, he was force-marched for approximately 90 days for a distance of 1,000 miles to Stalag Luft 11B, near Berlin. T/Sgt Airey remained there until his liberation by the British on 2 May 1945, near Lueneberg, Germany. At the time of his liberation, he weighed around 100 pounds, almost 60 pounds under normal. (4:4) But more importantly, T/Sgt Airey had survived the solitude and harshness as a POW with honor. He had truly won the battle of wills, not wits, over his captors.

10. The Prisoner of War Medal was authorized by Congress and signed into law by President Ronald Reagan in 1980. The Prisoner of War Medal is awarded to any member of the Armed Forces who was a POW after April 5, 1917 (the date of America's entry into World War I), and to any person who was taken prisoner and held captive while engaged in armed conflict. The recipient's conduct, while in captivity, must have been honorable. (3:114) CMSAF Paul W. Airey (Retired) was presented the first Prisoner of War Medal by then CMSAF James Binnicker, on 20 July 1988, at 1055 hours in front of the Senior NCO Academy, Kissing Hall, Building 1143, Gunter AFB. (6:-) Presentation of the first Prisoner of War Medal to the first Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force had brought closure to Paul Airey's chapter as a POW.

11. As we prepare to enter a new chapter in Air Force history, Global Engagement—A Vision for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, our enlisted corps will be challenged with new, exciting levels of responsibility and opportunity. It is therefore important we reflect upon the past 50 years of glorious Air Force history. Paul Airey deserves a chapter in our enlisted history. His legacy consists of patriotism—voluntary entry into the AAF, professionalism—served as a radio operator-aerial gunner on 28 World War II bombing missions, courage—survived captivity with honor, devotion to duty—went on to become the first CMSAF, and humility—awarded the POW medal. As enlisted

members we can draw inspiration and strength from the contributions made by Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force (Retired) Paul Wesley Airey and thousands of other brave airmen to the development of air power, the enlisted professional and our enlisted heritage. Let us never forget their sacrifice, service and patriotism. Never forget!

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Ailey, Paul W. Oral History Interview, 23-24 March 1981. Typed transcript, K239.0512-1267 C.1, in USAF Collection, Air Force Historical Research Agency.
2. Bednarek, Janet R. *The Enlisted Experience, A Conversation with the Chief Master Sergeants of the Air Force*. Air Force History and Museums Program, 1995.
3. Fowler, William, and Evans Kerrigan. *American Military Insignia Medals and Decorations*. R355.13 42 Senior NCO Academy Library. Edison, NJ: Chartwell Books, 1995.
4. Sexton, Chalmers Lee Jr. *United States Air Force Chief Master Sergeants Former Prisoners of War and Missing In Action*. M-U 44220, Senior NCO Academy Library. 15 September 1995.
5. Unit History, 485<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group (Heavy), 1943 and 1944, GP-485-III (BOMB) and GP-485-SU-AW (BOMB), in USAF Collection, Air Force Historical Research Agency.
6. Unit History, United States Senior NCO Academy, 1988, K239.07T, in USAF Collection, Air Force Historical Research Agency.